



KEEPING YOUNG TEXANS SAFE ON DIGITAL PLAYGROUNDS THIS SUMMER

by Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott

WITH THE END OF THE SCHOOL YEAR AND the arrival of summer, young Texans are more likely to have unsupervised time at home – and in an increasingly digital world, that means more opportunities to visit potentially dangerous online playgrounds. Unfortunately, cyber predators do not take summer breaks. Texas parents are the first line of defense against criminals who use the Internet to prey upon children. Families must stay engaged in their child's activities online, set boundaries and know the capabilities of minors' mobile phones and handheld gaming devices.

Police officers across the state who specialize in cyber crimes investigations know all too well that dangerous criminals lurk online. Texas parents must remain vigilant and remind their children that cyber predators pose a constant and very real threat to their safety and well-being. Parents should warn their children not to share personal information with strangers online – and to never agree to a face-to-face meeting with someone they meet on the Internet.

Informed and active parents can help protect their children from all types of online threats. By surfing the Internet with their children and fostering open conversations about the websites they visit, parents can both teach and learn

from their children. Parents should give children and teenagers ground rules for their Internet usage – including the hours they can access the Web and the types of websites children can visit.

Texas parents should also establish boundaries for children's mobile phone usage. Cyber Crimes Unit investigators with the Attorney General's Office have arrested several sexual predators who used wireless devices in an attempt to call or text children. These communications often include sexually explicit language or images and are intended to lure children into a sexual encounter. Wireless devices that allow users to surf the Internet may also give children an opportunity to go online and access sexually explicit content, chat rooms and social networking sites without a parent's knowledge.

Parents should monitor their children's mobile phone Web usage and teach them to avoid calling or texting anyone they do not actually know. Young Texans should also avoid giving out personal information through their wireless devices. Any child who receives a communication – including a photo or video – that is inappropriate, hurtful or otherwise makes them feel uncomfortable should immediately notify their parents. If parents suspect criminal activity or believe that their child is in danger, they

should save the image or message and contact law enforcement authorities.

Fortunately, many wireless carriers offer controls that allow parents to monitor and manage their child's cell phone usage. These controls allow parents to set limits on incoming and outgoing text messages and phone calls. For example, parents can restrict specific phone numbers, limit the quantity of text messages and prohibit communications during certain hours. Depending on the provider, parents can also filter or completely block websites from being accessed by their child's wireless device. Increasingly, wireless devices are also equipped with global positioning system (GPS) features that give parents the ability to track their child's whereabouts.

Finally, Texas parents should be aware that video game systems now have many of the same capabilities as home computers. In particular, these gaming devices allow users to interact with other players through typed messages, voice communication or even online video chats. Parents should be cognizant of the fact that child predators can use these game systems to prey upon children.

Although children may enjoy playing video games with their friends online, parents should carefully consider

whether to enable a gaming system's online chat feature. During online conversations, predators may look for clues that reveal a child's physical location. Parents who choose to allow online chatting should strongly caution their children not to discuss anything personal while playing online games with players they do not know.

Video game systems typically have parental control features that can be used to restrict game features that pose increased risks. These controls allow a parent to:

- Enable or disable a game console's chat features or manage with whom and how a user can communicate and play;
- Enable or disable Web browsing;
- Permit or block access to online games; and
- Restrict games based on maturity ratings.

Parental control features on a wireless phone or game system are designed to give parents peace of mind. While these tools are important, actual parental supervision and communication offers the best level of control. To keep young Texans safe while they enjoy their summer break, parents should communicate openly with their kids and set clear limits on Internet, wireless device and gaming system usage.

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